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ABSTRACT

A semantic differential instrument of four scales was used to evaluate employees' and supervisors' attitudes toward a differentiated performance appraisal training process. The sample included 237 employees and 83 supervisors in the Health Resources Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The study found the instrument to be highly reliable and determined that possible personal biases and hostilities between federal employees and supervisors did not interfere with the process of establishing performance standards. The results further indicated a high degree of agreement between employees and supervisors concerning the determination of performance standards. (Author/PGD)

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HOW FEDERAL EMPLOYEES AND SUPERVISORS VIEW PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

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Abstract

The establishment of performance standards is a process that has promise for reducing inefficiency and waste in the federal bureaucracy. This study found that a semantic differential scale designed by the authors to measure federal employees' and supervisors' attitudes toward establishing performance standards to be highly reliable. Secondly, it was found that possible personal biases and hostilities between federal employees and supervisors did not interfere with the process of establishing performance standards. Finally, a high degree of agreement was found between employees and supervisors in determining those performance standards.

How Federal Employees and Supervisors

View Performance Standards

The federal Executive Branch with its many departments and agencies has long been plagued with an inefficient and costly bureaucracy. The concept of efficient operation through economies of scale has not worked in the federal bureaucracy. The Carter administration tried with little success to revamp the federal government through reorganization and reform. President Carter's efforts while laudable in intent were naive and half-hearted in implementation. Today the Reagan administration is vigorously mandating cutbacks and eliminating many federally controlled regulatory and service-orientated agencies in order to stop the wastefulness and growth of federal government and to reduce spending. Accountability, cost-effectiveness, reform and productivity appear to be the key terms heard in the capital today. Federal employees and supervisors for their part feel a growing fear that they will lose their jobs as cutbacks continue. There is an urgent need to appraise job performance within the federal government and to justify the existence of federal agencies. The purpose of this paper is to examine the attitudes toward the performance appraisal program adopted by one of these federal agencies, the Health Resources Administration (HRA).

The Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978 established guidelines and principles to regulate more closely the performance of federal employees. The CSRA attempts to protect federal employees with sections regulating arbitration, recruitment practices, performance appraisals, a merit system, staffing procedures, types of appointments, and labor-management relations. This act created in part, a Senior Executive Service to provide for better management of the federal government's executive work force. For our purposes the relevant sections of the CSRA are those found in Chapter 43, Title 5 U.S.

Code. This part of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 requires a periodic appraisal of actual work performance of federal employees. The purpose of this appraisal is to reward employees for good performance and help those employees whose performance does not meet acceptable standards to improve their work. This performance appraisal process is also used to examine behavior and attitudes of and relationships between supervisors and employees.

Castetter (1976) says,

> Performance appraisal may be defined as the process of arriving at judgments about an individual's past or present performance, against the background of his work environment, and about his future potential for an organization. The appraisal process is an administrative activity designed to assist personnel achieve individual as well as organizational goals. (p. 231-231)

Castetter's (1976) traditional definition of performance appraisal emphasizes an administrative judgment or assessment of individual performance rather than an interactive or participatory approach. In the impersonal age of systematic and bureaucratic approaches to solving problems, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has endeavored to develop a more contemporary model to improve communication by involving supervisors and employees in an interactive appraisal conference. There is an emphasis in OPM's regulations and guidelines on cooperation and participation in the appraisal of worker performance. One assumption of the contemporary model is that involving both groups (supervisors and employees) in the performance appraisal means an agreement can be reached that is not just acceptable but productive. Another assumption is that those who actually work in a particular position know the requirements for it; that is, the worker knows how to make the most efficient use of time, knows the effective ways for completing tasks, the

ways for completing tasks, the basic requirements for the position, and the minimum performance levels, and knows how to execute a cost-effective operation.

The Health Resources Administration of the Department of Health and Human Services participated in this performance appraisal process and was a prominent force in the Public Health Service in terms of developing and implementing a comprehensive system as outlined by OPM and the CSRA. While much of the program development was ordinary, what set HRA apart from the other agencies was its systematic feedback mechanism. In order to adequately evaluate the real effects of the training program on implementation, the training staff used a semantic differential scale called: "Establishing Performance Standards: CSRA, Employer, Supervisor, Negotiations," which determines employee and supervisor attitudes toward the process of establishing performance standards.

Analysis of the findings from this instrument set the stage for designing methods, practices, and resources for the evaluation of the performance standards development training and for developing new training programs for helping the agency to become more productive and accountable. Thus as a result of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, an interactive process for establishing performance objectives was adopted by HRA and an instrument was designed to measure attitudes toward that process.

The questions that concern government agencies regarding performance standards are how much the training costs, how much training is necessary, and whether or not the training of supervisors should be different from that of employees. Our research was directed toward answering the last question. Second, this study attempted to establish the reliability of the instrument designed to measure attitudes toward the performance appraisal process. Finally, our study compares the attitudes toward performance standards of two

distinct groups that make up the federal service: supervisors and employees. Often supervisors and employees look at one another as adversaries. We felt it was necessary to see if this negative attitude would carry over into the interactive process of establishing performance objectives.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

The subjects were 83 supervisors and 237 employees in the Health Resources Administration, Public Health Service, Department of Health and Human Services. The Civil Service Reform Act has mandated that all federal employees periodically undergo an appraisal of their work performance. The prerequisite step to the appraisal process is the establishment of performance standards. A needs assessment was conducted and the results revealed that supervisors and employees would be receptive to a differentiated training program for establishing performance standards.

DIFFERENTIATED TRAINING MODEL

The differentiated training model was adopted on the basis that 1) supervisors were responsible for initiating and completing the performance standards process and would need more indepth training than employees; 2) some employees and supervisors know more about the performance standards process than others and would therefore require less training.

Based on this, a set of "Core Knowledge Objectives" was identified. This core came to represent a two-hour workshop which was made mandatory for all employees. Supervisors were exempt from this training but could volunteer to attend. Three key objectives were identified for the knowledge core:

1. The employee will explain and describe the components of a CSRA-prescribed performance appraisal.

2. The employee will define and explain the basic terminology and concepts involved in establishing performance standards, including the interrelatedness of these terms and concepts.
3. The employee will be able to explain and describe the steps necessary for establishing performance standards.

For an indepth training for supervisors a set of "Core Simulated Performance Objectives" was identified. Emphasis in this core was placed on the nuts and bolts of establishing performance standards. This core was described in a six-hour workshop which was made mandatory for all supervisors. Employees were exempt from this training but could volunteer to attend the sessions. Eight key objectives were identified for the simulated performance core:

1. Given a position description and a completed job element questionnaire, the supervisor will identify job tasks, responsibilities and corresponding job elements.
2. From a list of job elements, the supervisor will identify appropriate job elements, which will be used to describe the employee's position for purposes of performance appraisal.
3. Given a model position description, the supervisor will identify those which can be deemed to be the critical elements of that job.
4. After identifying job elements, the supervisor will select the element or elements which would be appropriately indicated as a critical element(s) of the position description.
5. Given a position description and completed job element questionnaire, the supervisor will identify job elements which will be used to describe his subordinant's position for purposes of performance appraisal.
6. Given job elements, the supervisor will determine indicators to measure performance.

7. The supervisor will give examples of "performance standards."
8. Given job elements and critical elements identified for their own position, supervisors will develop corresponding performance standards which meet the established criteria.

Having developed mandatory core knowledge objectives for employees and having developed mandatory simulated performance objectives for supervisors, the authors identified a set of "Background Objectives." Training in these objectives was made optional for both employees and supervisors:

1. The employee/supervisor will recognize the need for setting and using performance management more effective.
2. The employee/supervisor will know and understand the Civil Service regulatory provisions which govern establishment of performance standards.
3. The manager will know and understand the legalities involved in establishing performance standards.

In summary, the differentiated training model provided two hours of mandatory training to employees and six hours of mandatory training to supervisors. Both employees and supervisors could elect to undergo background training underlying the establishment of performance standards.

PROCEDURE

Even though training in performance standards is mandated by law, subjects volunteered for specified training sessions during the work day. The training was provided by the Human Resources Development (HRD) Branch of HRA. Two instructors from the HRD Branch and two instructors from the private sector comprised the training staff. Sessions were scheduled on a continuous basis through several work days. Subjects attended sessions that best accommodated their respective work schedules.

The curriculum was standardized to the objectives previously listed. Instruction was a mixture of lecture, demonstration, discussion, and nonprint media. At the end of each workshop, employees (two hours) and supervisors (six hours) filled out the semantic differential which served as the device for measuring their perceptions of the process of establishing performance standards.

SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL

The semantic differential was composed of four scales; each scale was made up of nine polar adjectives. Figure 1 summarizes the content of the four scales used to evaluate the attitudes of employees and supervisors following performance standards training.

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Insert Figure 1 here

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Each subject was asked to respond to each of the four concepts by placing an "X" on each of the 36 scales. The sample below depicts the format of the scale:

Scale 1: Performance Standards
(CIVIL SERVICE REFORM ACT)

realistic:	_____	:	_____	:	_____	:	_____	:unrealistic
unsupported:	_____	:	_____	:	_____	:	_____	:supported
fast:	_____	:	_____	:	_____	:	_____	:slow
static:	_____	:	_____	:	_____	:	_____	:dynamic

According to Kerlinger (1973), "the semantic differential (SD) is a method of observing and measuring psychological meaning of concepts" (p. 566). The concepts selected for evaluation of performance standards were chosen because 1) they would elicit strong feelings in a positive or negative direction; 2) they seemed to capture the essence (semantic space) of the performance standards process.

Civil Service Reform Act. This provides the impetus for establishing standards. All federal workers are aware of this law and its general emphasis on increasing worker accountability.

Employees. These workers are required to undergo periodic performance appraisal and are responsible for making input into standards for the performance of their work.

Supervisors. These workers are responsible for initiating and carrying through the performance standards process with employees.

Negotiations: In establishing performance standards, employees and supervisors are allowed to negotiate the substance of the standards.

Nine polar adjective pairs were identified for each of the four concepts based on three pairs selected from each of the three basic dimensions of the concept: 1) Evaluation, 2) Potency, 3) Activity, (Osgood, et. al., 1957; Kerlinger, 1973, p. 569). On a random basis, one-half of the 36 pairs were placed on the scale in a reverse fashion to counteract response bias tendencies.

DATA ANALYSIS

A seven-point rating scale was used with positively arranged items evaluated one through seven and negatively arranged items evaluated seven through one. Analysis of data yielded by this scoring system was directed to several statistical formulas. First, we sought to ascertain the reliability of this semantic differential as a tool for comparing the perceptions of employees and supervisors. Second, using scales 2 and 3, we sought to ascertain if significant differences existed between supervisors and employees as they perceived each other in the performance standards process. Third, using scales 1 and 4 we sought to determine if differences existed between

employees and supervisors as they viewed the performance standards process following training.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We sought specifically to answer the following questions:

1. Is the semantic differential a reliable instrument for evaluating supervisors' and employees' views of the performance standards process?
2. Do personal feelings between supervisors and employees negatively affect the establishment of performance standards?
3. Having undergone training in establishing performance standards through a differential training model, do employees and supervisors perceive the performance standards process in a similar fashion?

RESULTS

The data from the semantic differential was coded and several tests via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) were run in order to ascertain the degree of agreement between supervisors and employees in the Health Resources Administration regarding the establishment of performance standards. The first step in this process was to ascertain the reliability of the semantic differential as the measure of agreement. An Alpha Coefficient was used as the measure of reliability, and the results for each of the four scales and a reliability coefficient for the total of the four scales are reported as follows:

Scale 1: Performance Standards: CSRA	.88
Scale 2: Performance Standards: Employees.	.91
Scale 3: Performance Standards: Supervisors.	.89
Scale 4: Performance Standards: Negotiations	.88
Total Scale (Scale 1 + Scale 2 + Scale 3 + Scale 4).	.94

Next, we focused on scales two and three. On scale 2 employees rated themselves and were also rated by supervisors. On scale 3 supervisors rated themselves and were also rated by employees. Significant differences between

supervisor's and employee's perceptions of one another suggest that personal feelings (resentments, hostilities, etc.) override their respective perceptions of the performance standards process.

Table 1 reports the results of this analysis. A mean score was derived for each of the two groups on each of the two scales based on the total score for each of the nine polar adjective pairs. No significant differences were found between employees and supervisors (83 supervisors; 237 employees) on the

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Insert Table 1 here

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Employee scale, although supervisors rated employees more favorably than employees rated themselves. On the Supervisor scale, no significant differences were found between employees and supervisors, although employees rated supervisors more favorably than supervisors rated themselves.

Scale 1 (Civil Service Reform Act) and Scale 4 (Negotiations) were used to ascertain the degree of agreement between supervisors and employees over performance standards. Table 2 depicts the mean scores for each of the two groups on each of the polar adjective pairs for Scales 1 and 4. The profile for employees and supervisors depicted shows quite a bit of agreement on the variables of CSRA and Negotiations in the Performance Standards process, although employees rated the process more favorably than supervisors. In order to test for significance of difference between the perceptions of

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employees and supervisors, a one-way ANOVA was performed on each of the polar adjective pairs for each of the two scales. Table 3 reports the results of this analysis.

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Insert Table 3 here

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For scale 1 (CSRA) only two polar adjective pairs revealed differences which were significantly different beyond the .05 level. These were on the measures of "static-dynamic" and "old-new." In each of these two cases, supervisors' ratings were more favorable than those of employees. For Scale 4 (Negotiations), only one polar adjective pair revealed differences which were significantly different beyond the .05 level. This polar adjective pair was "slow-fast" which employees rated more favorably. Tests for Homogeneity of Variance revealed that scores were affected significantly ($p = .05$) by differences in the sizes of the groups on only three of the eighteen adjective pairs for the two scales. These adjective pairs were limited to Scale 4 and were "weak-strong," "tense-relaxed," and "effective-ineffective." In order to ascertain the effect of these minor differences among the paired adjectives, we completed an ANOVA comparing the total scores for employees and supervisors. We used the mean for the total score of each group on each of the two scales. Table 4 reports the results of this analysis. No significant differences

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were found using the total scores for employees and supervisors for scales one and four. To refine the extent of the general agreement between supervisors and employees, we correlated supervisor ratings to employee ratings with a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The scores compared were the mean scores on each of the 18 polar adjectives from Scales 1 and 4. The coefficient of .82 was significant at the $p = .001$ level.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to ascertain the attitudes federal employees and supervisors have toward establishing performance standards after having undergone performance standards training. Supervisors received more indepth training than employees. The first research question sought to ascertain if the semantic differential is a reliable instrument for evaluating supervisors' and employees' views of the performance standards process. With a range of .88-.91 for reliability on the four separate scales and a reliability of .94 for the total of the four scales, we conclude that the semantic differential is a highly reliable instrument for measuring supervisors' and employees' views of the performance standards process.

The second issue which we sought to resolve was whether or not personal feelings between supervisors and employees negatively affect the establishment of performance standards. To answer this question we compared employee and supervisor ratings of one another as well as ratings of themselves. Because no significant differences were found in these comparisons, we conclude that personal bias or feelings did not becloud an assessment of the degree of agreement between supervisors and employees over the performance standards themselves.

The third research question was aimed at determining whether or not employees and supervisors perceive the performance standards process in a similar fashion after the two groups have undergone training through a differential training model. Minor differences were noted between employees and supervisors when they were compared on the paired adjectives for scales 1 and 4; however comparisons of the two groups' responses on the total scores for scales 1 and 4 revealed no significant differences. A correlation between supervisor and employee responses for scales 1 and 4 was found to be high.

We therefore conclude that there was a basic agreement between employees and supervisors over the performance standards process following training through a differentiated training model.

The use of the semantic differential in evaluating performance standards training has significant merit. As seen in the HRA, the supervisors and employees tended to support one another in giving higher scores to others than they gave themselves, and the supervisors tended to support what the organization was doing in reaffirming and justifying their membership-power position within the organization. One can conclude from this that a positive and cooperative attitude exists in HRA toward the Civil Service Reform Act in general and its specific intent in implementing performance standards. The use of this analysis as well as this instrument could assist other public bureaucracies to implement a similar type of performance management system by providing such an organization with a verified evaluation and a set of results which can serve as a monitor or referent point for its own analysis. Any federal or public organization would need to refine such an instrument in order to provide sophistication in the implementation phase of a comprehensive performance management system.

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FIGURE 1

Four Semantic Differential Scales For Evaluating

Performance Standards Training

Scale 1: Performance Standards (CIVIL SERVICE REFORM ACT)

1. realistic-unrealistic
2. unsupported-supported
3. fast-slow
4. static-dynamic
5. new-old
6. unclear-clear
7. saving-wasteful
8. weak-powerful
9. fair-unfair

Scale 2: Performance Standards (EMPLOYEES)

19. active-passive
20. dishonest-honest
21. willing-unwilling
22. unsuccessful-successful
23. powerful-weak
24. hostile-friendly
25. fast-slow
26. incapable-capable
27. superior-inferior

Scale 3: Performance Standards (SUPERVISORS)

10. capable-incapable
11. dishonest-honest
12. willing-unwilling
13. powerful-weak
14. slow-fast
15. friendly-hostile
16. inferior-superior
17. active-passive
18. unsuccessful-successful

Scale 4: Performance Standards (NEGOTIATIONS)

28. active-passive
29. soft-hard
30. weak-strong
31. fair-unfair
32. powerless-powerful
33. inefficient-efficient
34. relaxed-tense
35. fast-slow
36. ineffective-effective

TABLE 1

Employee-Supervisor Ratings

	$\bar{X}$	F	F-Probability
Scale 2: EMPLOYEES			
Employees' self-rating	38.32	1.05	n.s.
Supervisors' rating of employees	41.30		
Scale 3: SUPERVISORS			
Supervisors' self-rating	38.60	.135	n.s.
Employees' rating of supervisors	39.60		

TABLE 2

Mean Scores of Employees and Supervisors
on Scales 1 and 4

Scale 1: Civil Service Reform Act

Scale 4: Negotiations

Employees _____

Supervisors . . . . . .

TABLE 3

Results of the One-Way ANOVA for Employees and Supervisors on Polar Adjective Pairs for Scales 1 and 4

	$\bar{X}$ Employees	$\bar{X}$ Supervisors	F	F Prob
Scale 1: CSRA				
unrealistic-realistic	3.71	3.63	.133	.715
supported-unsupported	3.90	3.81	.178	.673
slow-fast	3.06	3.09	.024	.878
static-dynamic	3.71	4.20	7.267	.007
old-new	4.28	4.71	4.193	.041
unclear-clear	4.12	3.71	3.115	.079
wasteful-saving	3.38	3.29	.157	.693
weak-powerful	3.81	3.82	.000	.988
unfair-fair	3.83	3.79	.028	.866
Scale 2: Negotiations				
passive-active	4.94	4.74	.785	.376
soft-hard	4.39	4.11	2.244	.135
slow-fast	3.83	3.30	6.440	.012
weak-strong	4.21	3.95	1.549	.215*
unfair-fair	4.40	4.18	1.047	.307
powerless-powerful	4.15	4.02	.412	.522
inefficient-efficient	4.32	3.89	3.503	.062
tense-relaxed	3.87	3.50	2.658	.104**
ineffective-effective	4.11	4.04	.108	.743***

* Test for Homogeneity of Variance, p = .001
** Test for Homogeneity of Variance, p = .024
*** Test for Homogeneity of Variance, p = .016

TABLE 4

Results of ANOVA for Employees and Supervisors on Scales a and 4 Using Total Score for Each Scale

	$\bar{X}$ Employee	$\bar{X}$ Supervisor	F	F Prob.
Scale 1	33.00	34.26	.209	.649
Scale 2	35.84	35.48	.016	.899